

The Cardboard Theatre: T. S. Eliot's Idea of History by Stan Smith

The discussion of Eliot's cultural lineage has frequently assumed a simple opposition between the rival claims of English domicile and New England descent. Eliot's writings have themselves encouraged this tendency. Overtly, they require us to observe the landscapes of London and rural England, or the family snapshots of haut-bourgeois Boston. The St Louis of Eliot's childhood, which furnished the name of his memorable persona (Prufrock-Littau, Hugh Kenner informs us, was the name of a local furniture store), and the image of the river as 'a strong brown god' which opens *Dry Salvages*, rarely occurs as the scenario of the poems. Indeed, the stage-direction prefixed to this poem demonstrates Eliot's usual attitude towards his mid-western patrimony, distracting our attention from the unsavoury effects of the Missouri misc-en-scene ('the river with its cargo of dead negroes, cows and chicken coops') to the properties of a more condign birth-right.

Yet Eliot's mid-western origins are not merely a matter of 'background'; they are a central part of the meaning of his poetry. The complexity of his personality has its sources and resources in the complex negotiation of a complex and contradictory inheritance. But the personal equilibrium salvaged from this inheritance—the spiritual cement for this 'familiar compound ghost'—owes much to that temporary settlement effected by Eliot's family in the boom conditions of nineteenth-century St Louis. If the Mid-West is absent as the overt content of Eliot's poetry, it presides throughout as a determining context of experience, embodied in the very forms of that experience, in the stances and attitudes assumed by the poet.

A few suggestive paragraphs by Gabriel Pearson have sketched in some of the less recondite elements of this experience.¹ Pearson stresses the all-pervasive moral presence in the Eliot household of the dead grandfather, W. G. Eliot, who, as one of the architects of post-Civil War St Louis, invested not only his stern Unitarian ethic of service but also the family honour in the fortunes of the city. The St Louis Eliots were leading members of a 'practical aristocracy' with the prestige and patronage that, in a highly normative provincial setting, meant permanent visibility. W. G. Eliot bequeathed to his grandson a paternalistic sense of social obligation reinforced by a conviction of specialness—sustained both by Unitarian doctrine and the pride of patrician stock—which needed to be beyond reproach. But, Pearson records, image and reality fell apart when

¹Eliot: 'An American Use of Symbolism', in Martin (ed.), *Eliot in Perspective* (Macmillan, 1970).

the Steffans exposés of 1902-4 'revealed St Louis flagrantly boss-ridden and corrupted'. In the clean-up which followed, he notes, 'the Eliots were apparently involved'.

It is here, surely, that the obscure emotional link in Eliot between election, fallenness, and visibility, has its genesis. Bernard Bergonzi has also emphasized the importance of the mid-western experience in shaping Eliot's identity; but, in an unacknowledged paraphrase of Pearson, he blurs into impersonal background ('in the 1900s there came shattering disclosures of municipal corruption')¹ what must have been an intensely humiliating experience for the adolescent Eliot, caught out by tainting circumstances at a moment of maximum self-consciousness. In a world of strict moral rectitude where the self was a guilty public secret, hoarded from discovery by the poker face and the laconic manner, visibility now meant vulnerability to an immediate, smearing otherness. Even to see this world was in some way to be polluted: its very contingency demonstrated one's fallenness, the inescapable dependence on

The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted.

The oppressive givenness of the world depicted in *Preludes* leads the elect soul to dismiss its actual landscape as—in a portentous metaphor—'masquerades/That time resumes'. The spatial inclusiveness of the consciousness that animates *Prelude IV* enacts the dual condition of superiority and fallenness: the 'soul stretched tight across the skies' is at once the imperious Bradleyan circumference of a lapsed world, and a crucified victim, perennially on display and under strain, 'trampled by [the] insistent feet' of a reality which should be 'a family extension' (see below).

Yet to acknowledge this fallenness in a world everywhere unconsciously depraved is to recover a hint of elective grace:

You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands.

In contrast with the 'eyes/Assured of certain certainties', the consciousness afflicted by its own adulteration can become

The conscience of a blackened street
Impatient to assume the world.

The conviction of specialness, however, defensively expects and pre-empts the dismissive brutal sarcasm with which *Preludes* ends. Election will always be qualified by a nervous, hedging self-deprecation. But impatience will mature, through that culture of self-

¹T. S. Eliot (Macmillan, 1972). I shall be reviewing this book in a subsequent issue.

sacrifice which besets Eliot's writings, into an 'eternal patience' that brings an assumption not of this world.

Exile was not, initially, for Eliot an alienating but a liberating experience, offering a reassuring anonymity from which to construct a new, self-made identity. Dispossession jostles with an unmistakable relish in Eliot's account of his own deracination, in a letter to Herbert Read in 1928, quoted by Bergonzi:

Some day I want to write an essay about the point of view of an American who wasn't an American, because he was born in the South and went to school in New England as a small boy with a nigger drawl, but who wasn't a southerner in the South because his people were northerners in a border state and looked down on all southerners and Virginians, and who so was never anything anywhere and who therefore felt himself to be more a Frenchman than an American and more an Englishman than a Frenchman and yet felt that the USA up to a hundred years ago was a family extension.

The paratactic circling enacts a movement similar to that of Prufrock's, never coming to rest in any fixity that could provide a handle. The 'broken Coriolanus' of *The Waste Land* suggests that autonomy can go sour; and already, that masterpiece of elliptical honesty, *Gerontion*, acknowledges that flight from the centrifugal, disruptive motions of other selves which disturb the equilibrium of a 'dry brain' means also evacuating both world and mind of content:

I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
 To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
 I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
 Since what is kept must be adulterated?
 I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
 How should I use them for your closer contact?

To be rootless is to be free from the constraints of unreal cities, seeing unseen the downturned gazes of their inhabitants, reduced to wraithlike crowds always in transit. Eliot's fear of a contingent landscape, imposing roles and obligations which inhibit the free play of the self, lies at the heart both of his idea of tradition and of those *paysages intérieurs* of a Symboliste poetic for which he opted from *The Hollow Men* onwards.

'Tradition' is a personal artefact that supersedes the polluting givenness of history, as an intuitive flash perceives the unity underlying the disparate cultural bric-à-brac of *The Waste Land*. The cultural objects of *Tradition and the Individual Talent* wait inertly in a timeless aesthetic space for the discriminating Individual who will reconstitute their unity. History in *Little Gidding* is a residuum of

achieved events, not a living movement, but 'a pattern of timeless moments', 'only a shell, a husk of meaning', as vacuous as the Chapel Perilous, till resurrected by a redeeming individual presence. Hence the contemplative stance of the *Quartets*. One can stand in unambiguous relation to dead men, whose communication may be 'tongued with fire beyond the language of the living', but who tell no tales and certainly don't answer back unless, like the 'familiar compound ghost', in the only reciprocal exchange in the poem, they are ventriloquial productions of the authorial voice. Such moments of 'intersection time / Of meeting nowhere, no before and after' extricate the self from the ravelling, intricate filaments that reach back into the waste sad time of a collective history. In the devaluation of the merely contingent, the poem hovers between meaninglessness and the infolding of all meanings, place dissolved in grace. The inclusiveness is self-negating: actual being is only gratuitously located: 'I am here / Or there, or elsewhere', 'England and nowhere. Never and always', 'Whether on the shores of Asia or in the Edgware Road'. Contempt for the specific leaves the poem always on the point of an action, never actually soiled by commitment.

As symbolic projections, historic men are uprooted from their actual divisive history, 'folded in a single party' in that 'constitution of silence' which is the poet's equivocal endowment. The sifting out of a coterie of exceptional individuals from the collective turmoil of the English Civil War, to set them in the timeless apotheosis of their common election, converts them into emblematic figurae, denying the validity of their actual deed in an eternal patience that transcends them all. The Blitz, likewise, the importunate violence of a given world, can be transmuted into the muted urgency of a spiritual emblem: 'the dark dove with the flickering tongue'.

Four Quartets offers a world curiously empty of people. A deliberate abstractive movement evacuates the contingently human from a reality which is, 'on the one hand', focussed in privileged moments of ecstatic perception, and, 'on the other hand', a sequence of massed, generalized, impersonal momenta. In *East Coker* history is condensed to a series of images which assume a fetichized autonomy enforced by the passive voice, that seems to have dispensed with flesh and blood agency:

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a bypass. . . .

A sublime insouciance poises that inert 'Is' to negate the active, substantial remaking,—plucking, as if by a magic sesame, field, factory and bypass out of thin air, and then successively cancelling

them. Men appear concretely in this world of almost totally automated process only as the nutrient humus of tradition, 'Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf'. or as shadowy fictions infiltrating the present through the archaisms of Eliot's reclaimed ancestor, author of *The Governour*. The socially abstracted, corporate simplicity of the ghostly may-dance is simply a reflex of the metaphysical wheel, or the circling self-sufficiency of the symbolist poem, aspiring to the condition of music, disaffiliated from the ragged, disparate, untidy rhythms of work and sexuality and mundane living. Meanwhile—

Houses live and die: there is a time for building
 And a time for living and for generation
 And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane,
 And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots
 And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto.

The anthropomorphizing tendency, apparent here, substitutes throughout the poem for the absence of any human praxis. 'The deep lane insists on the direction', for example, with a quirky peasant idiosyncrasy; but 'you lean against a bank while a van passes' which seems to be driving itself.

Only momentarily are we allowed to glimpse other faces, and at once they are dispersed into the mere furniture of a lapsed alien world, dissolving into abstraction, evaporating into the landscape, as the elect consciousness plays over them:

Only a flicker
 Over the strained time-ridden faces
 Distracted from distraction by distraction
 Filled with fancies and empty of meaning
 Tumid apathy with no concentration
 Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
 That blows before and after time,
 Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs
 Time before and time after.
 Eructation of unhealthy souls
 Into the faded air. . . .

The tossaway correlation of 'men and bits of paper', the linking of diseased lungs to diseased air, as if its victims were really its causes, the final collapse into the incantatory massification of suburban place-names, each with its cliché associations, cunningly deflect enquiries about the observer, himself pathologically distracted by these visions of distraction.

What is missing throughout Eliot's work is a substantial middle ground, of language, of meaningful social forms, of what Raymond Williams has called a 'knowable community', that would mediate

between detachment and attachment, self and others, the rigid antitheses of a dichotomized consciousness. For all his life-long attempt to fabricate a social identity, the painful subordination to the minutiae of religious and social observance, this middle ground eluded Eliot.

The gap is dramatically embodied in *Murder in the Cathedral* in the estrangement of protagonist from Chorus who, as Echoes to his Narcissus, use a language of passive consumption to define their dependence on his will. Bergonzi argues that the theme of the play is 'a common twentieth-century situation', 'the struggle of the lonely and courageous individual against an unjust and ultimately murderous authority'. Yet, at times, this seems no more than the public occasion for the unfolding of a private revenge tragedy. Becket's way only becomes clear after the Women of Canterbury have petitioned him to reach a compromise that would exempt them from the need to abandon their happily mediocre routine of 'living and partly living'. Becket persists in equating the real with the intense ('Human kind cannot bear very much reality') and it is contempt, finally, for their soiled importunate averageness which drives him on. They, too, are expected to suffer 'to the sword's point', or to acknowledge their unworthy inability to follow him to martyrdom. Compromise would be a false charity, allowing them to sink back into the slough of history. That this last, unnumbered temptation, to which Becket succumbs, is not intentional, but emerges unwittingly from the internal momentum of his monodrama, makes it all the more revealing. When Becket, in one of the few actually *dramatic* moments in the play, rounds on the audience and, in a series of punctuated jabs, rams home their complicity, he speaks with the sublimated venom of the wronged aristocrat, forced to participate in the ludicrous caper of history, finally extricating himself with a vengeful supercilious disowning:

You, and you,
And you, must all be punished. So must you.

The spleen of the Missouri Eliots, men of quality in a shabby world, able in the end to blame their dereliction on the circumstantial rot, is what surfaces here, as it does in those vignettes of metropolitan squalor in *Four Quartets* where the brittle exasperation of the voice rises to a familiar arrogance. But the exercise in *contemptus mundi* can barely conceal its origin in the tired *Weltschmerz* of a desolate commuter, forced to participate in that 'age of mediocrity' which, Amiel noted, 'freezes all desire'.

Eliot never finally came to terms with the tangible material world which, as merchant banker, eminent man of letters, generous patron of arts, chairman of many committees, he so substantially inhabited. His tendency to resort, as here, to a catalogue which, like the news-

paper in *Portrait*, reduces an overflowing, intimidating otherness to manageable linearity, is virtually admitted in the final shift, from a list of social types, to a list of lists:

. . . all go into the dark,
And dark the Sun and Moon, and the Almanach de Gotha,
And the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of Directors,
And cold the sense and lost the motive of action.

For all Bergonzi's claim that 'He was as opposed to capitalism and bourgeois democracy as the Communists', Eliot's contempt is the ineffectual disdain of the Tory aristocrat, cavalierly donned by that sentimental Marxian clown (*tendence Groucho*) who remains parasitically dependent on the order he despises.

At times, in *Quartets*, in passages of great poetic force, Eliot reaches self-consciousness of this élitist hauteur:

Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

We are suspiciously aware that the need for humility is a recognition withheld from the majority of men: the voice itself quavers with the irascibility of age. And indeed, when the note is taken up later, in *Little Gidding*, the indignation (and the glee) at having seen through 'the quiet-voiced elders' (the sanctimonious ghost of grandfather Eliot, hoist with his own petard) is extended into a general indictment which snatches self-righteousness from the very jaws of humility, from

' . . . the conscious impotence of rage
At human folly, and the laceration
Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.
And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.'

What really rankles is the embarrassing suspicion, as in *Prufrock* or *Portrait*, that others (one's oculists) may have known all along more

about one's motives than oneself. But shame is converted into a guilt which then, with a fine élan, rounds on its assailants with the contumely of a justified sinner for a world of fools gulled into an applause as irrelevant as their disapproval. A counter-encirclement restores the self to a conviction of its outraged innocence: an ambiguous syntax leaves unclear whether the 'exasperated spirit' is subject or object of repeated wrongs. The persistent echoes of *Hamlet* suggest that these buffeting blows are the stings 'That patient merit of the unworthy takes'. The 'refining fire' of art, or faith, then becomes, like the quivering flame of the epigraph to *Prufrock*, Prince Hamlet's 'Mousetrap', the cryptic, sly rehearsal of our guilty secrets, the private parts of fortune, that evades being held to account.

Four Quartets is, as Donald Davie argues, a Symboliste poem, endlessly talking about itself. But beneath the aesthetic chatter it is also a self-revealing work, giving itself away with a garrulous candour. It is not four place-names plus a Voice, but a located personal utterance; not, finally, a musical exercise or an aesthetic stratagem, or a mystic celebration, but a testament that uses all these to enact an intensely private and yet recognizably general character. This character, inextricably involved in a world whose fundamental reality he cannot concede, convinced of its theatricality, is a reluctantly public figure compelled to dance, cry, chatter, in resentful compliance to the plaudits of his inferiors. Eliot suggests in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* that 'From one point of view the poet aspires to the condition of the music-hall comedian'. From another 'point of view', he transcends it. For his act is committed on a stage of his own choosing, which in the end is as unreal as his fictitious identity. If he is the lonely figure on the stage, he is also the whole theatre that admits, in the terms of Bradley's Idealism, only a spectral audience:

I said to my soul be still, and let the dark come upon you
 Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
 The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
 With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness
on darkness,
 And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama
 And the bold imposing facade are all being rolled away. . . .

Yet to flee such contingent being is to seek the 'heart of light', spiralling centripetally to the still centre of the turning world, where a merely human complexity, the terrifying gulfs in perception and in communication of a fallen world, give way to an instant vision and communion in which there is, no longer, anything to declare.

I spoke in my previous article of Prufrock's resemblance to Verkovensky, in *The Possessed*. There is one other character in Dostoevsky's novel who might, finally, be invoked to give some body

to the figure that lurks behind the *Quartets*. Von Lembke (in middle-age a provincial Governor), as a young, ambitious Prufrock, slighted in love,

‘did not shed many tears and set about making a cardboard theatre. The curtain went up, the actors came out and gesticulated with their hands; the audience sat in the boxes, the orchestra moved their bows across the fiddles by some mechanical device, the conductor waved his baton, and in the stalls the young gentlemen and the officers clapped their hands. It was all made out of cardboard, and it was all devised and executed by Von Lembke himself.’

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Hart-Davis MacGibbon £2.75 21 May publication

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